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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 ALGIERS 000717

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SUBJECT: ALGERIA: ENGAGEMENT FOLLOWING PRESIDENT'S CAIRO
SPEECH

REF: A. SECSTATE 71325

[1](#)B. ALGIERS 543

[1](#)C. ALGIERS 673

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The President's June 4 speech in Cairo was closely watched by a generally receptive Algerian public, as was his July speech in Ghana. Our Algerian contacts appreciated the President's effort at Muslim outreach -- epitomized by opening the speech with "assalaamu alaykum" -- and believed the sincerity of his message that the United States and the Muslim-world can bridge the gaps in our mutual understanding. But they are quick to point out that, in the near term, the Algerian general public will be skeptical of U.S. commitments to engage the region absent real progress on Israeli-Palestinian relations. Beyond that, they want the kind of longer-timeline engagement that can bring basic security and socio-economic development to a country that is still emerging from a dark decade of brutal violence and terrorism. Post's engagement has focused on economic and capacity-building initiatives, as well as helping to develop Algeria's stunted civil society and promote political and economic reforms that will lessen the appeal of extremism. English language instruction, civilian nuclear cooperation, commercial promotion of green technology, and military medical exchanges exemplify how the goals outlined in the Cairo speech may be translated into tangible results. We face serious challenges in our operating environment, however, including a significant terrorism threat and security restrictions, a fossilized government, an obstructionist bureaucracy, a regressive investment policy, and a citizenry distrustful of its politicians. In addition to post programs, high-level engagement, including VIP visits to Algeria, are an important motor to drive U.S. engagement in Algeria and our soft-power cooperation programs. We would also note that Algerians face the same visa/SAO challenges that other posts have cited, particularly regarding commercial contacts with time-sensitive travel plans. END SUMMARY.

REACTION TO SPEECH: DEEDS MUST FOLLOW WORDS

[1](#)2. (U) Algerians have expressed cautious optimism over President Obama's speech in Cairo, as well as his speech in Ghana (ref B). The French language press coverage was generally positive, hailing the President's message as one that Arabs and Muslims are not used to hearing from U.S. presidents, and considering the speech a turning point in U.S. relations with the Muslim world. The Arabic language press, on the other hand, was more reserved in its assessment, opining that President Obama's speech will not lead to real change for the Muslim world unless Arabs and Muslims bring about change themselves. Overall, the speech helped improve the image of the U.S. in Algeria, but many of

our contacts remain skeptical that USG policy will change significantly. Algerians were particularly interested in the President's assertion in Ghana that Africa needs strong institutions rather than strongmen and that constitutions should not be changed simply to allow an individual to remain in power. The Algerian constitution was changed last November to allow President Bouteflika to run for a third term. While Algeria is part of both the Arab world and Africa, Algerians do not feel they belong wholly to either. Thus, while the sentiments expressed in each speech have resonance for Algerians, they see themselves to some extent as a secondary audience in both cases, underlining the belief that any actions we take must address this country on its own terms, not in a Pan-Arab or Pan-African context.

13. (C) University of Algiers sociologist Zoubir Arous told us July 15 that Algerians reacted positively to President's Obama's Cairo speech but added that the message needed to translate into action. "Algerians need to see concrete steps, otherwise they will view Cairo the same way they view Bouteflika's many promises, as just talk." Political analyst and journalist Ali Mebroukine provided us similar feedback on July 13 before he authored a full-page article in the French-language daily "L'Expression" July 26 that commented on how President Obama's prescriptions for better governance in Africa applied to Algeria.

14. (C) In a roundtable discussion with the Ambassador, local staff echoed much of the press and commentator sentiments toward the Cairo speech, stressing that Algerians appreciated the President's overtures. They deemed the speech historic and a departure from USG interactions with

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the Muslim world in recent years and were satisfied by the messages of hope and tolerance. They added, however, that Algerians are generally distrustful of politicians and their promises, meaning they will need to see concrete actions to back up the speech's eloquence and emotion. One of the most pointed criticisms, leveled at the speech by one of our women employees, was focused on the discussion of the veil. There are many more compelling issues facing Muslim women, she felt, such as domestic violence, limited voting rights, underage marriage, unequal legal treatment regarding marriage and divorce, and a lack of equal opportunity in employment and daily life.

SHORT-TERM ENGAGEMENT SHAPED BY PEACE PROCESS

15. (C) Our local staff, like press commentators and the political analysts we talked to, are quick to point out that the message delivered in Cairo will be viewed first and foremost in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Algerians feel a deep sympathy toward the Palestinian people and view Israeli settlements and recent military actions in Gaza through the lens of their own colonial past. Writer Mustapha Cherif told us he was ambivalent about the Cairo speech, because the message of hope stands in contrast to the outstanding political questions regarding the rights of Palestinians to live freely. Sociologist Arous told us that making progress on the Israeli/Palestinian peace process was the key to demonstrating U.S. resolve in improving relations with the Muslim world. U.S. pressure on Israel to halt settlement activity was a good sign, he said, "but you need to be more firm with Netanyahu and Lieberman on the issue." Arous added: "You need to talk to Hamas, whether you like it or not."

16. (C) As we reported in ref C, the Algerian government feels that the domestic security situation limits what immediate steps it can take toward normalization with Israel. Algerians will thus not be completely won over by USG follow-up to the Cairo speech without seeing progress in the peace process, for which they are skeptical; our contacts largely recognize that President Obama, while perhaps in a

stronger position politically than his predecessors to move forward on difficult issues like settlements, must balance competing interests that will likely prevent quick solutions.

(Note: A particularly Algerian add-on to the Palestinian issue is what many here regard as the parallel issue of Western Sahara. By this line of argument, perceptions of USG policy toward the Western Sahara and Washington's commitment to Sahrawi self-determination as part of a final resolution of that conflict is another measure by which U.S. sincerity will be gauged in Algeria. End note)

EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT REQUIRES LONG-TERM VISION

17. (C) The concrete actions sought by Algerians will not be easy to achieve with short-term strategies. In his published commentary on the President's remarks in Ghana, analyst Mebroukine argued that dialogue is needed in Algeria between the government and civil society and that institutions like the judiciary must be strengthened and public services improved to put Algeria on a path toward achieving Prime Minister Ouyahia's strategy for good governance by 2014. Local staff told the Ambassador that while Algeria is in dire need of rebuilding its civil society torn apart during the decade of violence and terrorism experienced in the 1990s, the continuing state of emergency imposes real limits to this effort, due to the restrictions imposed on freedom of association in the name of security. They said the speech's focus on the rule of law and equal administration of justice had resonance, due to the widespread perception that many of those in power here are above the law. Our staff felt that while most Algerians would like to see broad political reform and robust institutions, they must focus most of their attention and energy on day-to-day survival: security, food, shelter, and the health of their families.

ENGAGEMENT IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

18. (U) Our outreach efforts since the Cairo speech have included a speaker program July 6-7 with Dr. Lorenzo Morris of Howard University, who held several round-table events with political contacts, journalists, professors, and students focused primarily on the recent U.S. presidential elections and what might be expected during President Obama's administration. He also gave print, radio, and television

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interviews and received extensive positive press coverage. On July 9, American blues and jazz performer Bernard Allison played at the PanAfrican Festival in Algiers to wild acclaim, and we arranged for the Director of the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African Art to appear on Algerian television and in the print media to highlight the cultural significance of the festival as well as a proposal to bring an exhibit of Algerian art to Washington. We also launched the 2009 Youth Leadership Program on July 12 with the Ambassador hosting a lunch for 25 Algerian young people who will spend several weeks in the United States on an English language exchange program. The question-and-answer session prior to the students' departure was popular as it afforded them an opportunity to act as "junior ambassadors" to enhance bilateral cultural awareness.

19. (U) Our English language programs provide the greatest inroad to widespread engagement in education and youth and empowerment of women in Algeria. They have been very well-received and reach a key demographic of young Algerians. The ongoing two-year Access micro-scholarship program targets 14- to 16-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds and has been established in nine cities across the country. The NEA Intensive Undergraduate English Language Program sent 10 college-aged Algerians to American universities for intensive language instruction, over half of whom were military academy cadets. The MEPI-funded PSP program on July 22 completed another in a series of training sessions for

Algerian public school inspectors who will train others and evaluate the performance of English-language instructors in Western Algeria, with follow-on programming expected in the fall. A USAID regional partnership with Mentouri University in Constantine will also train the trainers in English-language instruction and class management, and we have English Language Fellows at universities in Oran and Constantine who provide instruction and support to our American Corners programming. We now have three American Corners operating across Algeria, reaching an estimated student population of 130,000. We have tried to launch a more comprehensive program with the ministry of national Education, but bureaucratic obstacles have so far stalled this effort.

¶10. (U) A MEPI-funded program by the National Council of State Legislators (NCSL) in late June provided constituent relations training to 200 parliamentarians and their limited professional staff, which received a surprising amount of press coverage. Perhaps more important, through that effort we were finally able to obtain ministry of interior authorization for a regional legislative body to meet with us and NCSL program specialists, and the legislative assembly of Oran recently sent us a formal, written request for technical assistance in the areas of constituent relations and civic education.

ENGAGEMENT IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INTERFAITH PARTNERSHIP

¶11. (U) At the request of the minister of post, information, communications, and technology, we have submitted a single country proposal through the International Visitor Program to take a group of Algerian government officials in charge of aspects of technology research and business development to Silicon Valley to review how start-up companies can be incentivized and nurtured. The program aims to familiarize the Algerian visitors with the relationship, fundamental to innovation, between research work at institutions like Stanford University and the commercial application of that work, e.g. by firms in Silicon Valley. The Commercial Law Development Program at the Department of Commerce is developing a similar program using MEPI funds with co-funding from the GOA that would demonstrate best practices to a set of Algerian companies and an Algerian agency in charge of technology transfer, including how Algerian firms could license U.S. technologies for application in Algeria.

ENGAGEMENT IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

¶12. (U) Our newly re-established commercial office organized a Green Tech fair on July 13, bringing a dozen U.S. firms involved in the water treatment and pollution control sectors to Algiers to exhibit their products and services. In addition to wide press coverage, over 200 Algerian government officials and business representatives attended the fair, which generated over 150 trade leads for American companies. The minister of water resources spoke privately

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with the Ambassador about his desire to see more American firms engaged in this sector. Since the Green Tech event, our commercial office has met with government officials in charge of water projects who said the agency was taking specific steps, such as English-language tender documents and extended filing deadlines, to attract U.S. firms, specifically those identified as leaders in applying this technology, to expand development projects in Algeria.

¶13. (U) We have a science and technology agreement with Algeria, and the most successful effort in this domain centers on the civilian use of nuclear technology. The Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) and the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security

Administration (NNSA) have developed what will likely be a two-year engagement plan with the Algerian atomic regulatory agency (COMENA) focused on radiation health physics. In conjunction with the NNSA project, the State Department's Nuclear Security Assistance Program (NSAP) has funded the travel of leading Algerian nuclear researchers and regulators to conferences regarding nuclear waste management and human resources issues, including a July 12 conference in Arizona. These exchanges have opened a fruitful dialogue with COMENA as the GOA develops a comprehensive civilian nuclear policy and legislative framework for applying nuclear technology and considers the development of nuclear power generation.

¶14. (SBU) Our mil-mil engagement has been limited, but a growing area of cooperation has been in the area of medical exchanges. A group of Algerians traveled to Texas in mid-July to tour Department of Defense medical facilities and exchange ideas on best practices, a follow-on to the visit to Algeria earlier in the year of U.S. military medical professionals who were well-received at Algerian military hospitals and university medical training facilities. The focus has been on improving the military's role as first-responders in mass casualty situations, such as earthquakes.

WHAT WE NEED

¶15. (C) While the President's speech stirred considerable interest, expectations for real change are quite low. Algerians not only distrust politicians in general but believe their own leaders are making little progress on issues beyond combating terrorism. If we are to be effective in engaging Algeria, we must continue to expand efforts already under way that acknowledge the imperative of improving socio-economic conditions in Algeria. Only this will turn the country's increasingly restive youth population away from violent extremism and toward goals of prosperity, social mobility, and political engagement through constitutional channels.

¶16. (C) Post has used funding from a number of sources to engage the Algerians in our core mission goals of counter-terrorism and combating violent extremism as well as encouraging political and economic reform. But we are also encouraging commercial engagement in Algeria outside of the oil and gas sector. And as the recent Green Tech fair demonstrates, such efforts hold promise. An opaque and lethargic government bureaucracy will continue to make this engagement challenging. We also face some of the same SAO issues on visa applications for exchange visitors, commercial contacts and government officials that other posts have reported. Delays in visa issuance confuses and frustrates our good contacts and also occasionally forces the cancellation of visits to the United States. For example, several businessmen were forced to drop off the first-ever commercial service delegation to the Offshore Technology Conference (OTC) in Houston this past spring. Nevertheless, as our efforts in the area of English-language instruction show, programming seen as apolitical and of direct-benefit to the Algerian people can be effective and popular. In general, we should invest heavily in exchanges, and remember that they are long-term programs, not something that will have a quick and visible payoff. We would like to see the short-term MEPI-style programming continue and grow, but with a recognition that programs need to be tailored to the Algerian environment and should be designed for engagement over a period of one to two years with specific end-results in mind rather than single events modeled after capacity-building conferences held in more developed countries in the region. In that regard, post also requires the human resources required to administer the myriad cooperation programs this active engagement strategy entails, such as the MEPI-programming and grants administrative

position we are currently establishing.

¶17. (SBU) The security environment remains a severe constraint on post's ability to carry out programming. But despite the significant restrictions on in-country travel, Embassy Algiers staff have found creative ways to operate, and we find that Algerians are also willing to meet us halfway, at places where we can work. Nevertheless, as long as the threat of extremist violence against our personnel remains high, operating safely will inevitably be a primary factor in the Mission's planning for this vital work.

PEARCE